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ABSTRACT

For the healthy midlife adult, the second half of life provides a balance for the first half: men become more nurturant while women become more aggressive. The definition of the midlife woman is tied to the family cycle, when her children leave home. Marital satisfaction often increases after the children are gone and relinquishing her role as mother is not a crisis unless it has been the sole source of a woman's worth. Freed from intensive nurturance, midlife women are able to turn their attention to task orientation. Although society offers many choices for involvement, most women feel guilty when they are not nurturing. They fear that their autonomy will cause them to be abandoned by family and friends. In addition to this risk of losing significant relationships, there are two societal phenomena which may provide a rationalization for women to remain in their nurturing roles: adult children often return to their parental home, sometimes with children of their own; and caring for aged parents is often an obligation for the midlife woman. Women must relinquish their need to nurture all others and allow themselves to nurture themselves in order to balance the first half of life with the second. (NRB)

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MIDLIFE WOMEN: THE NEED TO NURTURE SELF

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Midlife Women: The Need to Nurture Self

Carl Jung (1982) believed that mid life was the time of adaptation to one's inner being. There is a self--somewhere halfway between the conscious and the unconscious--which gives equilibrium to the total personality, the psyche. This balance can only be achieved in later life "after the brashness of adolescence and the wordly orientation of the early adult (Bischof, 1964, p. 194)." Midlife adults are established in marriage, in career and in their community. Most have children. At this midpoint they look back with regret and envy for things missed. "The energy streaming back falls into the unconscious and activates all the things he [she] had neglected to develop (Storr, 1983, p. 166)." The development of the function of the opposites means a renewal. The psyche is compensatory--a self-regulating system. The last half of life should provide a balance for the first. There is, therefore, in the healthy midlife adult, a slow change in personality. In Jung's terminology, men seek the "anima" and become more nurturant, women seek the "animus" and become more aggressive. From a perspective of wholeness, both the first and second halves of life are significant. Both sexes should express a need for commitment in areas other than those in which the traditional sex roles have confined them.

In 1968 Berniece Neugarten, well known for her pioneering work on adult development, reaffirmed this. Midlife men become more receptive to affiliation and nurturant promptings; midlife women, more responsive toward and less guilty about aggressive and egocentric impulses.

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More recent work concerning adult development has added credence to this thesis. Sheehy (1976) cites a different perspective that emerges as early as the mid-30s. "Time left" becomes an important factor. Suppressed aspects of ones identity are encouraged to surface. Many men and women become more willing to recognize, respectively, previously masked feminine or masculine dimensions of personality. Gould (1978) found that a preference for stability and continuity was mediated by a desire for a sweeping change in ones life. And that this happens just as family structures are being altered--as ones children leave home and ones parents enter the period of old age. Unique feelings for the generation "in the middle" are the the conflicting ones of satisfaction and dissension brought about by family and work (Hagestad, 1981).

> While it is during middle age that a major reorientation of the self occurs, such a reorientation is contingent on the major social structures in which one is involved: work, family, and the preoccupations that result from such involvements--productivity, generativity, love and care for others, and the meaning one derives from all major life involvements (Offer and Sabshin, 1984, p. 151).

Middle age has been defined not in the chronological sense but as a state of mind (Neugarten and Datan, 1973). My work is focused solely on the midlife woman. The definition of midlife woman is tied not to a chronological base either but by family cycle, specifically, when her children leave home. This period in the literature is referred to as (pessimistically) the empty nest and the closing of the gates, or (optimistically) the second honeymoon and the prime of life. Historically it is a new period in the life cycle. At the turn of this century women

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married at age 22 and often gave birth until they were menopausal. Large families were an economic asset and the woman's role as homemaker and caretaker was a crucial one that occupied her life span of about forty-five years. Today's woman can expect to live nearly 80 years. She will most likely marry and bear her two children before the age of 30 (Jongeward and Scott, 1977). What does she do with the second half of life?

The literature on maturing women often focuses on "motifs of loss: of youth and physical attractiveness, of the regular reminder of femininity in the menopause, of children and perhaps husband, of purpose of life (Williams, 1983, p. 396)." Barnett and Baruch (1978), however, note that the research actually presents conflicting evidence which needs to be clarified. Do middle-aged women have poorer self-concept, lower life satisfaction, and feel greater despair than middle-aged men as reported by Lowenthal et al. (1975) or are their lives equally rewarding as reported by Campbell (1976).

The literature on midlife women has changed drastically since the 1950s. Then it was filled with the type of aging mother who wouldn't cut the apron strings and thus ruined her children's lives or the type who was depressed, menopausal and neurotic. Much of the recent literature shows that midlife is a good time for most women. It need not be painful if she is open to new freedom and new potentials. There is a reevaluation of past experiences and future courses which can be painful or liberating, depending on life events (Notman, 1979).

Menopausal women are neither depressed nor neurotic. Menopause

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encompasses several years for most women in the age bracket of 45 to 54 and involves a gradual decline in gonadal functions. It has generally been perceived in our culture as an event marking the end of a woman's social usefulness, that is to say, procreation (McKinlay et al., 1974). About 80 percent of women report some physical symptoms but most of these are minor (Pearlmutter, 1978). The "hot flash," a sudden sensation of heat, is the only clear symptom attributable to menopause. Between one-fourth and one-third of women experience it, "and it varies widely in intensity (Troll, 1985, p. 37)." The older studies about the neurotic menopausal woman reported on the less than 10 percent of women who have serious difficulty and, so, seek medical care. Neugarten (1974) reports that surveys of women who do not seek treatment show that compared to other events which happen in midlife, menopause is not very significant. Little or no change or discontinuity in a woman's life was attributed to menopause. It is not a "crisis event."

In fact, despite menopause, women refer far less to biological factors in midlife than men do. Men define their age status by the work setting yet the most dramatic event for men is biological--their health and the decrease in body efficiency (the "my son beat me at tennis" syndrome). Women, in their nurturing role, are "more concerned over the body-monitoring of their husbands than of themselves (Neugarten, 1968, p. 96)."

When the children leave home both parents will become introspective as they evaluate their performance as parents. The parental bond changes but it doesn't end. The woman must no longer see herself as an active socialization agent. She must accept the separateness of her children and

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see them more objectively (Houseknecht & Macke, 1981). If a woman's life has centered on her children she may face a crisis significant enough to bring on a severe depression. The "supermom" sees her identity as threatened and she perceives that she has lost her self-esteem. Her conflict centers around her sense of loss of power, rather than persons, and its loss precipitates feelings of helplessness and hopelessness (Oliver, 1977).

The married woman just launching her children defines herself as middle aged. Even the unmarried woman or childless woman often defines herself in terms of children they might have had or the children of siblings or friends (Neugarten, 1968, p. 67). The "empty nest" years are good years for most women. Marital satisfaction increases across the life span, particularly after children leave home. Husband and wife have more time for each other and are more relaxed. There are extra financial resources as well. Relinquishing her role as mother is not a crisis unless it has been the sole source of a woman's worth (Bart, 1970). It is, however, a crucial time of life for the woman. As far as she is concerned her direction must be clearly resolved one way or the other. "Her hand has been forced; her husband's showdown may lie in the near future when retirement comes (Deutscher, 1969, p. 267)."

Although the sexuality of the older woman is often ignored by therapists, families and even the woman herself, midlife does not signal the end of sexuality. Many women are no longer inhibited by fear of unwanted pregnancy.There is a continuing need for intimacy. Masters and Johnson (1966) refer to a "second honeymoon," a time when most women have a renewed interest in their spouses and in the physical maintenance of their

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person. The midlife woman has renewed energy. She's no longer exhausted by the physical and mental demands of her children. Her renewed sexual interest may induce a similar interest in her mate. "There is pleasure and stability in her sexual relationship. The healthy aging woman has sex drives that demand resolution (p. 271)." There is absolutely no time limit to a healthy woman's sexuality.

As has been pointed out, the midlife woman, unlike women at the turn of the century, still has a great deal of time to fill and is not overburdened by mythical crisis events. Her husband is most likely still maintaining an intense investment in his work. She is freed from intensive nurturance. She is able to turn her attention to task orientation. Contemporary society offers her many choices for involvement--schooling, career, politics, church, and/or volunteerism.

Midlife for women then is "a time of endings and also a time of beginnings (Rubin, 1979, p. 6)." One phase of life is done and the midlife woman experiences the sadness of loss but also a sense of relief, a sense of freedom. Rubin says that the question, What am I going to do with the rest of my life?, is one that most midlife women didn't ask in adolescence. The mandates of her particular socialization were contradictory. She was told to achieve but not beyond what was appropriate for a girl. About this she was ambivalent as an adolescent, as a young woman, and still at the midpoint in her life.

An instrumental orientation may mean loss of relationshps. Midlife growth creates a conflict for the midlife woman which is an outgrowth of her socialization. Most women feel guilty when they're not nurturing.

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Her fear is that her autonomy will cause her to be abandoned by family and friends. It will cost her the time and energy which she will not be able to give to others. If she departs from her traditional role she may lose the approval of significant persons in her life who do not understand or feel threatened. Their "pride fades to a pout" if she becomes involved in new interests and is not available to meet their needs (Ibid, p. 128).

In addition to the risk of losing significant relationships there are two current social phenomenon which may provide a rationalization for women to remain in their nurturing role. Adult children often return to the parental home sometimes with their own children in tow. The need for years of advanced education, harsher economic conditions, and the separation-divorce rates all are reasons. And aging parents mean further obligations. Women's orientation to the experiences, needs and wishes of others can, in extreme form, entail a "loss of self in overwhelming responsibility for and connection to others (Chodorow, 1974, p. 59)." Miller (1976) writes that women become attuned to the needs of others and "better geared than men to first recognize others' needs and then to believe strongly that others' needs can be served (p. 61)." Often we find situations where women provide support but receive little support in turn. Her nurturance is taken for granted. If she's going to get on with her own life, the midlife woman must give herself permission to separate herself.

Carol Gilligan (1982) provides a model which speaks to this issue. Women see the world in terms of connectedness and are overthreatened by isolation. Women are tremendously sensitive to abandonment. In woman's development we have the fusion of identity and intimacy. Their identity

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is self described as daughter, wife, mother, lover, friend. Even highly successful and achieving women do not mention their academic and professional success when describing themselves. They measure their strength by attachment...giving, helping, not hurting, being kind. There's a conflict between achievement and care. Identity, defined by relationships, is judged by a standard of responsbility and care. For women the ethic of care is a premise of nonviolence--no one should be hurt.

Gilligan proposes that women move through three stages of moral development. The mature woman moves from an orientation of self-sacrifice to one of care, eventually realizing that the absolute injunction against hurting others may be an inadequate guide to resolving actual dilemmas. In some situations there is no way not to hurt. The conflicting truths of two people's feelings make it impossible to avoid hurt. A woman learns that she can not abdicate the responsibility for choice and that she will claim her right to include herself among the people who she considers it moral not to hurt. Self-sacrifice means violence to self. The healthy, mature woman will no longer do violence to herself.

Jane Loevinger (1970) also sees maturity as coping with conflicting inner needs, a respect fo autonomy of others, and finally, with a reconciliation of inner conflicts, a cherishing of individuality. Until midlife most women subordinate themselves and their work to their relationships. Then there is a change.

Similarly, Anne Schaef (1981) believes that relationships are still the center of reality for midlife women but that these become equal

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relationships, close friendships with other women and genuine friendships with men, and an important reationship with the self--"something that was never present in our earlier concept." Many women never had a relationship with theirselves because it would have seemed selfish. But at midlife the healthy woman knows that self-awareness and focusing on the needs of the self are not the same as selfishness. "The essence of self-awareness is a tenderness toward and a respect of the self which in turn allows us to be more tender and respectful toward others. When we make room for ourself, we can truly make more room for others (p. 113)."

The healthy adult balances the first and second halves of life. When they then reach the final stage of development, they will realize ego integrity. Erikson (1959) defines ego integrity as a post-narcissistic love of the human ego--not of the self--as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense...the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle. For a woman to realize this acceptance of her life cycle during the final episode of development she must at midlife relinquish her terrible need to nurture all others and give her self permission to nurture herself. She must allow herself the right to balance the first half of life with the second.

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